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SUBJECT: PRC/IRAN: SCHOLARS CONTINUE TO PUSH FOR COVERT
"KISSINGER" TALKS

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson.
Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: While state-run media in China question the motives of Western-led efforts to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue and stress that dialogue is the only way forward, two of China's leading Iran experts are doubtful the P5-plus-1 engagement with Iran will bear fruit. They echoed comments from other PRC academics suggesting the U.S. meet covertly with Iran to achieve a breakthrough, similar to Kissinger's 1971 talks with Beijing that led to the establishment of U.S.-PRC relations. One scholar speculates that China will not veto UNSC sanctions should the talks stall, because the U.S.-China relationship remains the overriding consideration for China and additional sanctions on Iran would not be effective. Beijing interpreted the U.S. reversal on the anti-missile system in Eastern Europe as an effort to influence Russia on Iran, and, the scholar speculated, Beijing may similarly seek a concession from the United States in exchange for cooperation on Iran. Another scholar said China's concerns over security in Xinjiang province play an increasingly important role in PRC policy considerations on Iran, a trend amplified by the relative deterioration of Beijing's political relationship with Tehran in recent years. He downplayed the role China could play in the negotiations and suggested leveraging regional powers such as Turkey, Pakistan and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries as potential "platforms" for talks with Iran.
END SUMMARY.

State-Run Media Sticks to the Hard Line

¶2. (SBU) China's state-run media has recently sought to reinforce the official PRC position on the Iran nuclear issue. The main editorial in the September 28 Huanqiu Shibao (a widely-circulated foreign affairs newspaper published by the Communist Party mouthpiece People's Daily) reiterated PRC opposition to "sanctions and punishment" from the international community to deal with the Iran nuclear issue, suggesting that Western media efforts to point out contradictions in China's policy on the issue increased the danger that Iran would turn toward extremism. The editorial said China would avoid the double standard that "some Western countries" applied to the Iran nuclear issue and questioned the motives of Western countries in dealing with Tehran's nuclear ambitions, but failed to comment on the announcement last week that Iran had been developing a covert uranium enrichment facility.

¶3. (C) PolOff discussed Iran-China relations and Chinese views on prospects for P5-plus-1 talks with Iran with Professor Wu Bingbing from Peking University September 23 and Director of Middle Eastern Studies Tang Zhichao from the Ministry of State Security-affiliated China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) September 28.

PRC Unlikely to Veto Sanctions if Raised

14. (C) Peking University Professor of Islamic Studies Wu Bingbing (strictly protect) told PolOff that the Iranian side was keenly aware of the U.S. need to demonstrate progress in the October 1 talks. He speculated that China would not veto UN Security Council sanctions measures proposed by the United States should the talks stall, because the U.S.-China relationship remained the overriding consideration for China in developing its Iran policy, but also because, in the PRC view, additional economic sanctions on Iran would not be effective nor would they affect China's primary interests in Iran. He said that Chinese leaders interpreted the U.S. decision to reconsider the installation of an anti-missile system in Eastern Europe as an effort to influence Russian leadership on Iran. He conjectured that Beijing would be looking for a similar concession from the United States in exchange for PRC cooperation on Iran, including possibly a change in policy on Taiwan arms sales.

Internal Considerations Force PRC Iran Policy Rethink

15. (C) CICIR's Tang Zhichao (protect) told PolOff that China's concerns over security in Xinjiang province played an increasingly important role in PRC policy considerations on Iran. He said that long-term instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan had contributed to an increase in violence and unrest among Uighurs in western China, and that Beijing needed Iran to play a positive role in support of regional stability to deal with its domestic security concerns. He said that shared religious links between Muslims in China and

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the broader Islamic world, including Iran, were forcing policy-makers to reconsider how to engage with the Middle East, a trend amplified by the relative deterioration of Beijing's political relationship with Tehran in recent years even as economic links had burgeoned.

More Calls for Se cret U.S.-Iran Talks

16. (C) Citing China's experience in establishing relations with the U.S. through Kissinger's covert communication with Beijing, both scholars urged the United States to engage in such bilateral talks with Iran to create a "breakthrough" that could push forward multilateral engagement. Peking University's Wu argued that the prospects for progress in the full P5-plus-1 setting were dim given that Iran had varying interests and relations with the six countries, particularly in the case of China and Russia, and was unlikely to negotiate openly and meaningfully with all six in the room.

Need a "Nixon in China" Moment

17. (C) Tang agreed that significant progress emerging from the P5-plus-1's engagement with Iran was unlikely and that U.S.-Iran relations needed a "Nixon in China" moment. He stressed that Iran had responded positively to the call for negotiations, clearly signaling Iranian hopes for President Obama's new approach. The United States was ultimately the decision-maker, Tang added, downplaying the role that China could play in terms of real negotiations and stressing that the current round of talks should only be seen as a starting point of a difficult process. Tang suggested leveraging regional powers such as Turkey, Pakistan and the GCC countries as potential "platforms" for conducting talks with Iran, and urged the United States to open a diplomatic facility in Iran to signal positive U.S. intentions.

HUNTSMAN